DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 246 347 CG 017 589

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TITLE Potential School Dropouts--The Attitude Factor.
PUB DATE Aug 83
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (91st, Anaheim, CA, August 26-30, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; *Dropout Characteristics; Dropout Research; *Dropouts; *School Attitudes; *School Role; Secondary Education; *Student Attitudes; *Student Behavior; Student Teacher Relationship

ABSTRACT

While attitude has long been recognized as a precursor to behavior, overt behavior does not consistently indicate attitude. To compare the attitudinal differences of successful students and potential high school dropouts toward teachers, education, parent/peers, and school behavior, 42 students in grades 9-12 completed the Demos D Scale. An analysis of the results showed that both groups held strong negative attitudes toward teachers. However, the potential dropout students also held strong negative attitudes toward school behavior. This combination of negative attitudes toward both teachers and appropriate school behavior precedes dropping out of school. It is suggested that programs designed to address only behavior are ineffective because they ignore the attitudinal precursors of the overt negative behavior of the dropout. (Author/BL)

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POTENTIAL SCHOOL DROPOUTS - THE ATTITUDE FACTOR

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CG 017589

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ABSTRACT

Forty-two Ss in grades 9 - 12 were surveyed using the Demos D Scale to determine if a difference exists between successful students, GI (honor students) and potential dropouts, GII (alternate school students) on the attitudinal variables of (1) teachers; (2) education; (3) parents/peers; and (4) school behavior.

Both groups showed strong negative attitudes toward teachers and a significant difference was recorded between groups for attitude toward school behavior. It is this combination of negative attitudes toward both teachers and appropriate school behavior which precedes dropping out of school.

It appears that it is not the behavior of students which is critical to success or failure in school but the effect that attitude has on how one perceives the purpose of school.

POTENTIAL SCHOOL DROPOUTS - THE ATTITUDE FACTOR

A recent publication by the Connecticut State Board of Education (1983) revealed that one out of every four students that enter high school will not graduate.

It is increasingly obvious that something is causing our students to become inefficient learners and failure-oriented pupils. Unfortunately, educators appear content coping with the negative behavioral symptoms which precede or accompany the act of dropping out of school. Attention to this overt negative behavior can be credited for encouraging the inception of alternate schools and programs.

Although alternate schools appear successful in keeping a certain segment of the student population from dropping out of school, they are susceptible to several shortcomings. First, they do not address cause, but only the behavioral symptoms of potential dropouts. Therefore, enrollments continue to increase as a growing number of students face failure and discouragement within the school environment. Secondly, they are implemented after the fact when the student's behavior has deteriorated to a point where school personnel have identified the student and referred them for service. Lastly, many alternate schools isolate their students from the mainstream raising the question as to whether they actually change inappropriate behavior or merely remove it from a less tolerant traditional setting to a more tolerant non-traditional one.

Ruby and Law (1982) attempted to resolve some of the drawbacks of alternate schools by creating an alternate program which allowed the students to continue in the mainstream while encouraging self-discipline. They noted that dropping out of school was not an isolated event but a chronic situation

which manifests itself in junior high or middle school through negative overt behavior patterns, i.e., increased absenteeism, poor grades, and behavior problems. They found that by profiling a student's progress throughout grade school, one could identify the potential school dropout and with appropriate intervention during this critical middle school period, negative behavior could be changed before trends develop and become irreversible. However, this program like the alternate schools, addressed overt behavior symptoms, not cause.

If it is the intention of educators to reduce the number of students dropping out of school, then it would appear that a more effective approach would be to establish programs that address the cause factors or precursors of the negative behavior which precedes the act of dropping out.

Attitude has long been recognized as a precursor to behavior (Kelman, 1974 and Klausmeier and Ripple, 1971). It is described as the covert force which directs behavior and if left unchallenged, will solidify into a way of life. However, the task of isolating a single attitude such as one's attitude toward school, becomes suspect because being covert, one's attitude must be inferred from overt behavior which unfortunately does not consistently indicate one's attitude (Bem, 1970). Secondly, the task of isolating one's attitude toward school becomes suspect because there may be other variables which effect a student's attitude toward school which are ouside the realm of academia. In an attempt to control for these variables, this study will compare attitudes between two groups of students whose consistent overt behavior has identified them by school officials as either successful (honor society students - criteria in high academic and social standing) or unsuccessful (potential dropouts/alternate school students - criteria for placement being average ability but failing because of high absenteeism,

behavior problems, under-achievement, etc.). The two groups will be compared on responses to an attitude survey which measures four variables which effect success in school. The variables are: (1) teachers, counselors, administrators; (2) education, training and college; (3) parents and peers; and (4) school behavior (Demos, 1976). The purpose will be to ascertain if there is a difference in attitudes between potential school dropouts and successful students and if that difference can be identified as the cause factor which precedes the overt negative behavior and subsequent act of dropping out.

METHOD

Subjects: Forty-two Ss were randomly selected from a 9 - 12 grade population of honor society members and alternate school members. All students had average or above intelligence. Twenty-one Ss were selected for each group - GI - honor society Ss and GII - alternate school Ss.

MATERIALS

The Demos D Scale provides for five possible responses which range from little to very strong negative attitudes on four variables: I represents attitudes toward teachers, counselors, and administrators; E represents attitudes toward education; P represents attitudes toward parents and peers; and S represents attitudes toward school behavior.

All Demos D Scale scores were converted to numerical scores - the higher the number the more negative the attitude - from least negative attitude being #1 to greatest negative attitude being #5.

PROCEDURE

The Demos D Scale was administered to each group of Ss by the experimenters. All Ss were asked to complete the survey anonymously and only identify their current grade placement.

The instructions were as follows:

> "Please read the twenty-nine questions and answer each as honestly as you can... If anything is not clear, let me know... You will have as much time as you need to finish... When you have completed the test, close your booklet and sit quietly... And begin."

Upon completion by all Ss in the group, the tests were collected, coded to represent the particular group, and later scored. While the Ss completed the test, their teachers were not present in the classroom, as their presence may have influenced responding.

RESULTS

An ANOVA was computed for the main affect attitude on the four variables - teachers, education, parents/peers, and school behavior.

Table I and Graph I provide an analysis of the responses between the two groups (GI and GII). No significance was found for the main affect attitude between groups. However, significance was noted within groups indicating a difference in individual group responses.

It is interesting to note on Graph I that both successful students and potential dropouts harbor strong negative attitudes toward teachers while displaying less negative attitude toward education, parents and peers, and school behavior, raising questions as to our method and technique of educating. The only significant difference was noted in responses toward

attitude regarding school behavior. This may provide insight as to the key area for educators to address in improving chances of success for potential school dropouts.

DISCUSSION

As the results indicate there is a significant difference between groups on attitude toward school behavior. Although no significant difference was found between groups on the other three variables of teachers, education, and parents/peers, it is important to note that both groups show a strong negative attitude toward teachers. It is this negative attitude toward teachers when combined with a negative attitude toward appropriate school behavior which encourages the overt negative behavior associated with the dropout.

Unsuccessful students characteristically come to class unprepared and are antagonistic toward school rules. Although the results of the survey showed unsuccessful students realize the need for an education, their behavior is inconsistent with their attitude and suggests that their purpose for being in school is something other than education, i.e., social, legal responsibility. They do not appear to perceive school as a necessary ingredient to a successful future, This places the teacher in the role of an obstacle and sets the stage for confrontation between teacher and student which usually results in punishment for the student. When punished, students characteristically react in one or more of the following ways: (1) they become apathetic and grades drop; (2) they become aggressive and cause behavior problems; or (3) they try to avoid the situation by skipping school or classes. Thus emerges the negative behavior associated with and/or

preceding the act of dropping out.

Successful students on the other hand generally come to class prepared and follow school rules. Based on their overt behavior, one can infer that these students perceive the purpose of school as being education which will benefit their future. Thus the teacher's role as disseminator of knowledge becomes secondary to the process of education and the teacher is viewed by the successful student as the vehicle by which one achieves success as an adult. Therefore, they do not allow their negative attitude toward the teacher to be reflected in classroom behavior as this would be counter-productive to attaining their goal of future success.

It would appear that it is not the behavior of students which is critical to success or failure in school, but the effect that attitude has on how one perceives the purpose of school. Although the behavior of the potential dropout is considered inappropriate by school officials, it is in fact appropriate for what the student perceives. Because of this fact, programs such as alternate schools designed to address only behavior are ineffective at best because they ignore the precursors and deal with symptoms, not cause.

If we assume that a child comes by his mind in the same way that he/she comes by his/her body through the process of development (Gesell, 1947), then it must follow that students' attitudes toward teachers and school behavior is born in the home, and then nurtured in the classroom. Kappan's 14th Annual Gallup Poll (1982) reflects this assumption. They surveyed the public's attitude toward public schools and found that both students and parents share a disenchantment with our system of public education. It was also reported that when parents of public school children were asked what their children liked best about school, the most frequent response was

the "teacher". However, parents of non-public school children reported the "joy of learning" to be the most liked aspect of school. The difference in responses may reflect parent perceptions which are given to students and may very well contribute to the development of the student's perceptions of the purpose of school and who's responsibility education is - teacher or student ?

This places the responsibility for success in school equally on the parents and the school system. If parents intend for their children to be successful in school then they must develop within the child a positive attitude toward education. This attitude can be developed by example. The school system must in turn emphasize the importance of both education and teachers as a vehicle to success in adult life. Schools need to develop varied curriculum to meet the needs of all students, not just those with college expectations. Schools need to convey a purpose and meaning to all students as their part in facilitating positive attitudes toward education. We must remember that education is not the process of imposing one's will upon another, but that process of nurturing within the student the desire to know and providing the tools to attain the knowledge.

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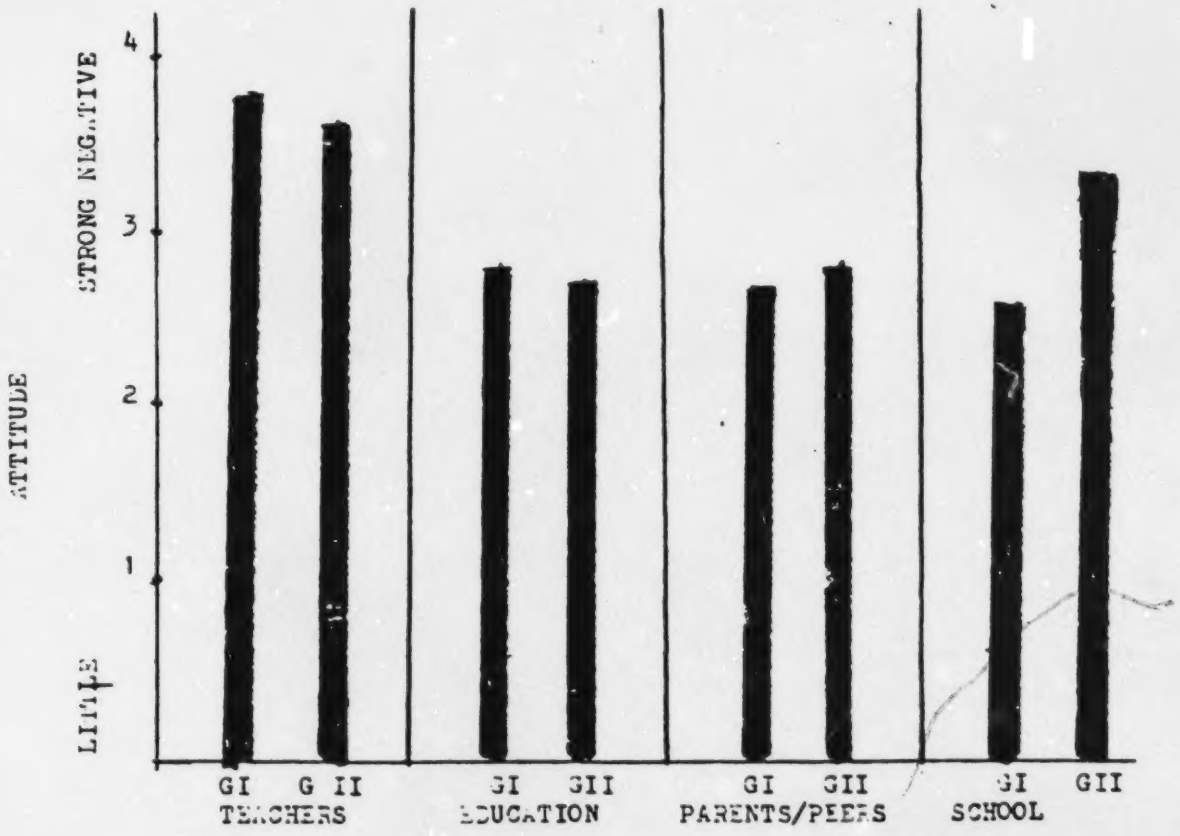
TABLE I

ATTITUDE

SOURCE	ss	df	ms	f	
G: Groups	1	1	1	1.20	NS
Error	33	40	.83		
T: Trials	21	3	7	14.58	*
G x T	2	3	.67	1.40	NS
Error	58	120	.48		
TOTAL	115	167			

* $p < .01$

GRAPH I



STUDENTS ATTITUDES TOWARD TEACHERS, EDUCATION,

PARENTS/PEERS AND SCHOOL BEHAVIOR

GROUP I = (Honor Students)

GROUP II = (Potential Dropouts)